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ABSTRACT

In Ontario, nearly half of the elementary schools have fewer than 300 students, and one quarter of the high schools have fewer than 600 students. However, the province's funding formula was designed for larger schools. Small schools in Ontario are operating without adequate staff and resources and are at risk of being closed. Since 1999, 192 schools have closed in Ontario, almost all of them small schools. This report examines school size across Ontario's elementary and secondary schools; the number of enrolled students required under the current funding formula to fund full-time principals, vice-principals, secretaries, teacher-librarians, and guidance counselors; the Small Schools Allocation, which provides additional support to a few qualifying schools; the funding gap, which affects half of Ontario's elementary schools; staffing trends in small versus large schools; the benefits of smaller schools; and the recent trend toward larger schools in Ontario. Provincial policies and programs to maintain small schools in Quebec, Saskatchewan, and Newfoundland and Labrador are described, and specific recommendations are offered for changing the Ontario funding formula to meet the needs of small schools. (SV)

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Ontario's Small Schools

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People for Education is a group of parents working together in support of fully publicly-funded Catholic, Public and French education in Ontario.

The Small Schools Report

Introduction

Research shows that smaller schools make excellent learning environments for students. In Ontario, nearly half of our elementary schools have fewer than 300 students, and one quarter of our high schools have fewer than 600 students. Because they are so effective, Ontario's small schools are a valuable resource. Unfortunately this province's funding formula was designed for bigger schools, with the result that our small schools are endangered. As this report shows, small schools in Ontario are operating without adequate staff and resources, and are at far greater risk of being closed.

Over the last 3 years, nearly 200 small schools have closed. Many of these small schools are located in rural areas, where the school is considered a vital part of the community. The loss of the school has a considerable impact on economic development and can ultimately mean the demise of the community.

In other provinces, steps are being taken to save small schools. The fate of Ontario's small schools, and ultimately the communities they serve, rests with the provincial government. If small schools are valued here in Ontario, similar policies to protect small schools need to be developed.

Our research shows:

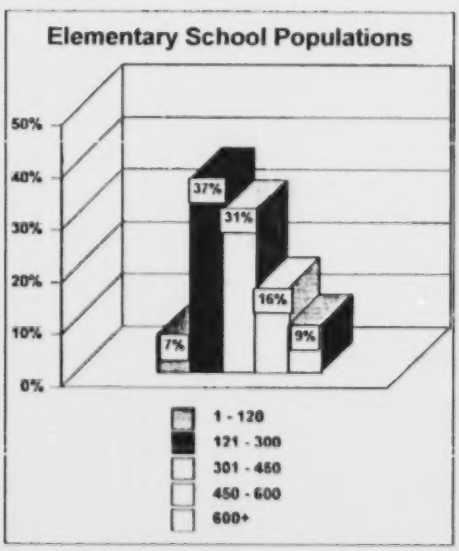
- Since 1999, Ontario's student population has increased by over 44,000; over the same period 192 schools have closed, almost all of them small schools (elementary schools under 300, secondary schools under 600).
- This year, only 76% of elementary schools with 300 or fewer students have full-time principals. In 1997/98, 86% had full-time principals.
- The number of small elementary schools with teacher-librarians has declined by 47% since 1997/98, compared to a 26% decline province-wide.
- Only 52% of small secondary schools have guidance counsellors compared to 100% of secondary schools with over 1,000 students.

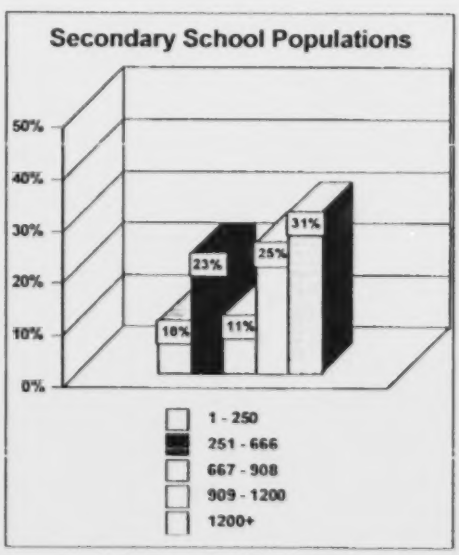
Funding

"Because our school is small, we don't have enough staff for proper supervision. We need more Special Education teacher allocation, but because our school is small we can't get it. We need more reading materials in the classroom; we need more secretarial and custodial hours. We need a full time principal. We need renovations to the washrooms. We need new computers. But, because our school is small, we can't have these things."
Elementary school, Near North DSB

Under the funding formula, student enrolment is the basis for most staffing and program grants.

Despite the fact that almost half of Ontario's elementary schools have fewer than 300 students, the provincial education funding formula is geared toward the small proportion of elementary schools that have over 450 students. It takes 909 secondary schools students to generate funding for one full-time secondary principal, but 44% of secondary schools in Ontario are under that number.





In the following chart, all elementary schools with 300 students or fewer and all secondary schools with 600 students or fewer, are small schools.

Per Pupil Funding			
Staff	Funding Formula Requirement	% of Ontario Schools Qualifying	% of Small Schools Qualifying
Principal, full-time elementary	364	43%	0%
Principal, full-time, secondary	909	56%	0%
Vice-principal full-time, secondary	667	67%	0%
Secretary, full-time, elementary	272	65%	20%
Secretary, full-time, secondary	188	93%	71%
Teacher-librarian, full-time, elementary	769	2%	0%
Teacher-librarian, full-time, secondary	909	56%	0%
Guidance counsellor, full-time elementary	5000	0%	0%
Guidance counsellor, full-time, secondary	385	88%	50%

For most boards, school sizes don't average out

The student-focused funding formula funds boards according to student/staff ratios that do not exist in most boards. It was developed on the premise that school sizes average out across the province. This may be true province-wide, but it is not true in individual boards. In the large number of boards where nearly all the schools are small, there are no larger schools to balance out the funding. Small schools need principals, secretaries, teachers and caretakers as much as large schools, but funding based strictly on per pupil amounts leaves most boards short. To pay for staffing in small schools, boards are forced to make cuts in other areas.

Small schools grants

There is additional funding available for very small schools under the Small Schools Allocation, but the criteria for funding are so narrow that very few schools qualify. Not only are the criteria narrow, but the funding itself is insufficient. Even when they do qualify, the funding is insufficient to allow qualifying small schools to support full-time principals, secretaries or librarians.

The Small Schools Allocation for elementary schools is restricted to schools with fewer than an average of 20 students per grade and that are located 8 or more kilometres from other elementary schools of the board. Small secondary schools which qualify have fewer than an average of 150 students per grade and are located at least 32 kilometres from another secondary school. For a small K-6 school, these criteria would mean a student population of 130 students or less, and few schools in the province benefit from this allocation.

The funding gap

Half of the elementary schools in the province fall into a funding gap – they are too large for the Small Schools Allocation, and too small to generate funding for a full-time principal. To keep their schools open and staffed, boards are forced to make cuts in other areas.

The provincial funding formula was intended to make funding fair across the province. But students in boards with a high proportion of small schools are disadvantaged in that they have less access to staff, programs and resources than students in boards with higher ratios of larger schools.

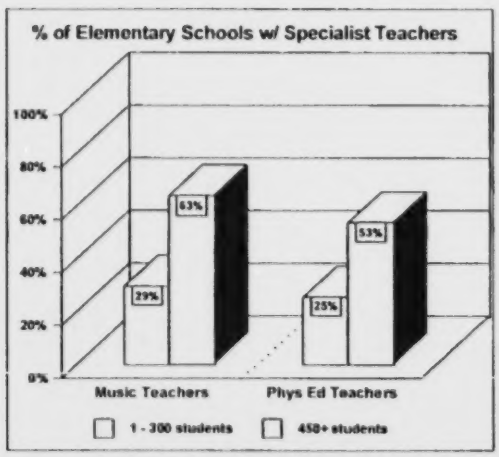
Staffing

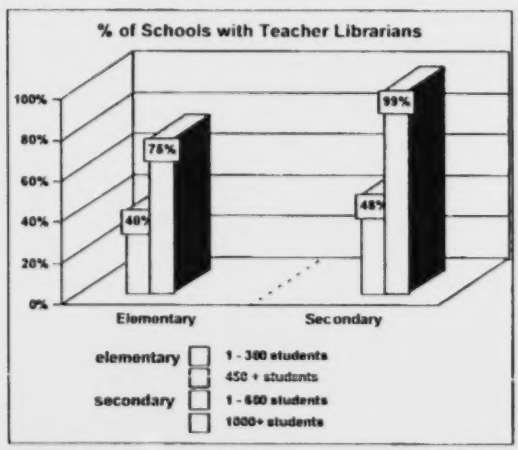
When small schools (elementary schools with 300 or fewer students and secondary schools with 600 or fewer) are compared with larger schools (450 or more and 1000 or more), it is evident that the funding formula favours large schools. This is true when comparing the availability of programs and teachers and when comparing the loss of programs and teachers over time.

- 76% of smaller elementary schools have full-time principals compared to 100% of schools over 450,
- only 52% of secondary schools under 600 students have full-

time guidance counsellors, compared to 100% of schools of over 1000 students,

- 40% of smaller elementary schools and 48% of smaller secondary schools have a teacher-librarian all or part of the time compared to 75% and 99% respectively of large elementary and secondary schools,
- 56% of small secondary schools had libraries open only part-time, compared to 1% of larger secondary schools,
- 45% of small elementary schools had libraries open part-time, compared to 27% of larger elementary schools.





Secondary school programs

Because funding for small secondary schools does not cover the cost of extra full-time staff, it is a challenge for school boards to provide an adequate range of programs and courses in small secondary schools. For many students in small schools, it is impossible to graduate with an adequate number of appropriate credits from their local secondary school.

Most secondary schools will have fewer students next year, with the loss of the OAC year. The small schools allocation was changed this year to reflect this, but the adjustment will not increase funding sufficiently to allow many small secondary schools to provide adequate programming.

Services and programs in small schools have declined at a much

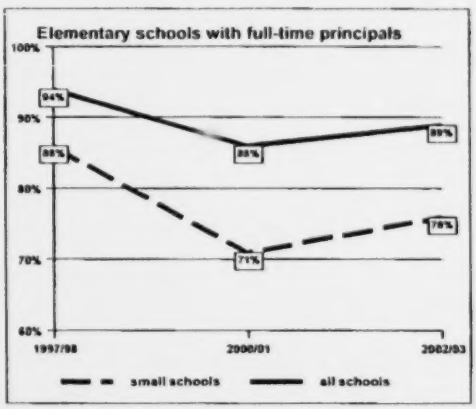
greater rate than those province-wide

"As a [school in a] rural economically depressed area our students do not have access to enriching experiences, which were previously funded by school boards. We do not have specialist teachers."

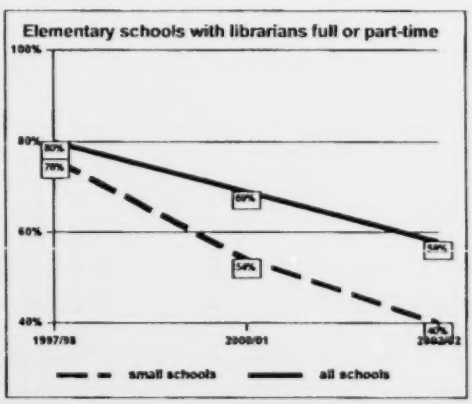
Elementary school, Near North DSB

Since 1997/98:

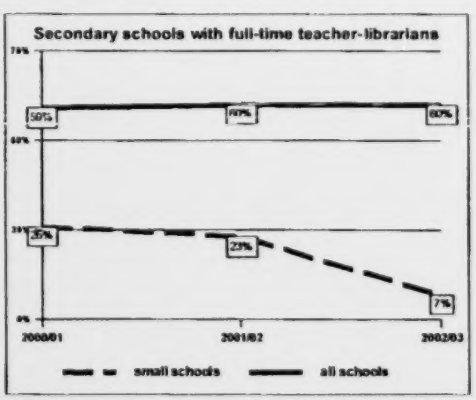
- The number of small elementary schools with **full-time principals** has dropped by 12% compared to all elementary schools in the province where the number has dropped by 5%.



- The number of small elementary schools with a **teacher-librarian** (full- or part-time) has declined by 47% compared to a 28% decline in all elementary schools.
- The number of small elementary schools reporting their **libraries** are open only 10 hours per week or less has increased by 500% compared to a 100% increase in all elementary schools.

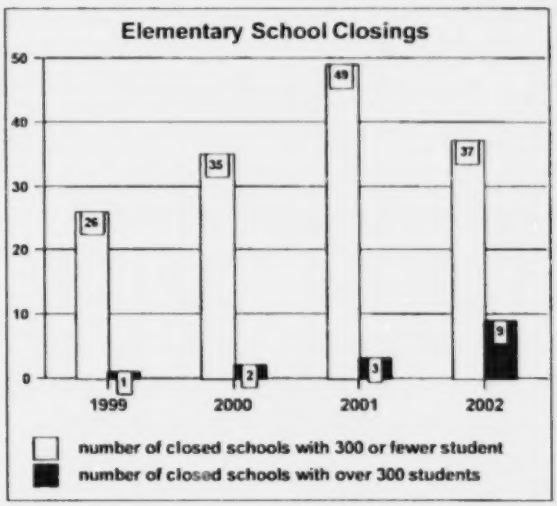


- The number of small secondary schools with **full-time teacher-librarians** has declined by 73% compared no decline in all secondary schools.



- Over the last four years

school boards have been forced to close ten times more small elementary schools than larger ones.



International research shows that small schools – commonly defined as elementary schools with no more than 400 students and secondary schools with no more than 900 students – are more successful when compared to larger schools. Small schools have proved to be such a superior and more successful model for educating children that the title of a research paper from the Centre for Education Research at the University of Wisconsin is, "The Ultimate Education Reform? Make Schools Smaller."[1]

The Benefits of Smaller Schools

"I am most pleased with our community support and the dedication of our staff and students. I have a deep concern about school closure as we are a small school (200) and are looking at review for closure in the near future. I know that if I could just walk a government official around this school, they would see for themselves that we are offering a quality education and a very safe environment for these children."

elementary school, St. Clair Catholic DSB

Research shows that smaller schools:

- improve student achievement,
- increase attendance and graduation rates,
- elevate teacher satisfaction,
- improve school safety,
- increase parent and community involvement.

According to the Small Schools Workshop, a group of educators and researchers at the University of Illinois at Chicago:

> The concept of small schools is based on the premise that, in contrast to large, factory model schools, small schools can create a more intimate learning environment that is better able to address the needs of those within the school. Students, teachers, and parents may all be better served if the school is small enough to allow for communication to flow, opportunities for collaboration to be cultivated, and meaningful relationships to be fostered. [2]

"Measured either as dropout rate or graduation rate, the holding power of small schools is considerably greater than that of large schools."
Kathleen Cotton, "School Size, School Climate and Student Performance"

In larger schools, students are more likely to get "lost" because of the anonymity created by larger student populations; and they drop out of larger schools at a significantly higher rate than they do out of small schools.[3] American studies have shown the dropout rate of a high school increases by about one per cent for every 400 students it adds to its enrolment. Incidents of violence and crime increase dramatically in schools with 1,000 or more students as compared with those of 300 or less. In urban American schools with fewer than 300 students, for example, 3.9% of the schools reported serious violent incidents compared with 32.9% of schools over 1,000 students.[4]

Cost effectiveness

Much of the drive towards larger schools has been based on the concept of "economies of scale." Researchers at New York University's Institute for Education and Social Policy found that, although smaller schools spent more per student than larger ones, ($7628 compared to $6218), the cost-per-graduate was actually slightly lower, as the drop-out rates at small schools were considerably lower than larger schools.[5] The study argues that, one uses the business argument of economies of scale to support larger schools, then similar business standards of quality assessment and rates of success should also be applied. The higher graduation rates for smaller secondary schools are evidence of a higher quality "product" and a more successful output, thus if measured solely on a per graduate rate, costs are lower.

Schools and communities

Schools are the hubs of their communities and have an importance that goes beyond education; they play a major role in the economic development of their communities and they make communities more attractive to newcomers. Businesses are more likely to move to communities with schools, and families will not move to communities without schools. As populations decline in northern and rural Ontario, boards reliant on per pupil funding close more schools. A vicious cycle ensues: fewer people move there, populations decline further, more schools close.

In many small towns and inner city neighbourhoods, small schools also offer space for community use. Three quarters of Ontario's small elementary schools and 83% of small high schools report that their schools are used by the community after school hours for everything from sporting events to ratepayers meetings.
Because of the size of its budget and payroll, a school is often the major

"industry" in a small community, and many businesses rely directly and indirectly on its existence. The presence of a school has an effect on residential and commercial property values. One study found that a rural, agricultural town in Nevada that lost a high school experienced an eight per cent decline in retail sales and a six per cent decline in the labour supply.[6]

School closings

Keeping Small Schools Open

In the last three years in Ontario, 192 schools have closed and a further 122 are under review for closing, almost all of them small schools. Nine per cent of Ontario's small elementary schools have closed in the last three years, compared to less than 1% of larger schools.

Ontario's school closing policy

School Closings 1999 – 2002			
	Elementary Schools	Secondary Schools	Total
Closed	168	24	192
Under Review/Slated to close	106	16	122
Number of Students Affected	46,030	14,636	60,666 (23,636 in schools slated or under review)
Average Size of School	168 students	368 students	

Ontario has no specific policy as to the optimum size of a school, nor is there any policy or funding to allow boards to maintain schools at a size that reflects the communities' needs. There is no policy to protect schools when they are the only school in their communities, or to ensure that those schools have adequate resources. There is also no policy outlining a consultation process for the building of new schools. There is some policy for school closings but little is proscribed in it.

Ontario regulations for school closings state that boards must have in place a school closure policy covering:

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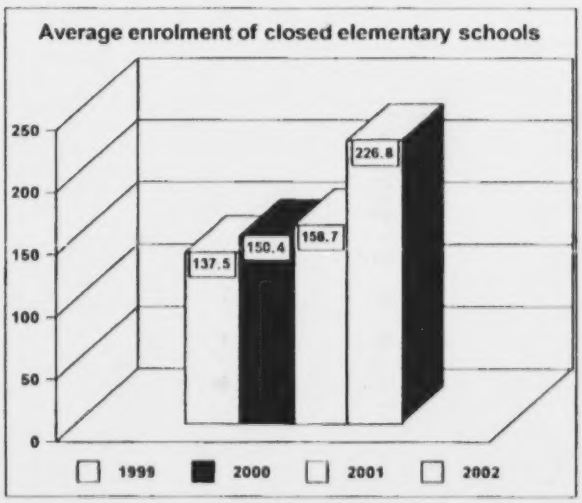
- the procedures for identifying schools to be reviewed for possible closure
- the procedure for consultations,
- the minimum time period between the identification of a school and the final decision of a board,
- requirements for public presentation of reports on community impact, busing, and the impact on other schools.[7]

The regulation does not define what the procedures or time lines should be, it simply states that boards must have them. There is no requirement that boards consult with their municipalities or involve them in the decisions to build or close schools.

New Ontario schools are larger

The move to larger schools can be demonstrated by comparing the enrolment of schools that have closed over the last four years, and the enrolment of schools that are being built.



The average enrolment of schools being closed has increased every year for the past four years.

The average size of elementary schools closed between 1999 and 2002, is 168 students, whereas the average size of new elementary schools built between 1998 and 2003 is 529.[8] The average enrolment of new secondary schools is 977, whereas the average enrolment of closed secondary schools was 368.

Small school strategies in other provinces

Quebec: Saving the last school in the village

In January 2003, the provincial government of Quebec received a report from the *Working Group on Maintaining Village Schools*. The working group was co-chaired by the President of the Federation of School Boards and the President of Rural Solidarity of Quebec. Included in the report were recommendations for the provincial government, school boards, and municipalities.

The provincial government was quick to respond. On March 5, 2003, the Minister of Education announced a policy to save "the last school of the village", saying, "Having a school is a strong symbol for the development and vitality of rural communities....Today we are taking new steps to give communities additional resources that will allow them to maintain village schools."

The government is developing a comprehensive program to keep rural community schools open:

- Each school, depending on its size, will receive an additional grant of $25,000 to ensure it is able to hire well-qualified teachers.
- Schools with 100 students or less will receive further grants to allow them to collaborate with other schools in their area on certain educational activities.
- The quality of these school buildings will be maintained by granting additional $2M in funding.
- All school boards will be asked to put in place a school closing policy involving public consultation (if they don't already have one).
- School boards with a school closing policy are asked to review that policy.
- They will create a new law that requires reciprocal consultations between municipalities and school boards, when a school is going to be considered for closing, with the intention of maintaining schools in single school communities.
- School boards will be legally required to participate in centres for local development.

This new provincial policy also strives to ensure that future teachers will be trained and well prepared to teach multi-grade classes. The province of Quebec will also continue to experiment with information technology and

communications to help small community schools. Their goal is to continue to find solutions that will assure the survival of schools, no matter where they are located in Quebec, and to maintain quality services for students.

Saskatchewan: Genuine consultation

The province recognises remote small schools with a grant that includes an enrolment factor (small school) and a location factor (sparsity) for funding purposes. A K-6 school "isolated school" will receive funding when the closest appropriate school is between 20 and 40 kilometres away. A school with grades 7-12 receives extra funding when the closest school is 30 to 50 kilometres away.

A sliding scale of funding is provided for schools in which there are fewer than 12 students per grade. For instance, a grade with a single student would generate extra funding of $7,100, while 5 students in a grade would garner $21,500.

School boards must closely follow the stipulations in the *Education Act* regarding the closing of a school. These involve consulting with the community over a minimum six-month proscribed schedule. "These are intended to be genuine consultations," said Don Sangster, Executive Director, School Finance. "Boards vote to go ahead with about 60% of the closings after the consultations, but about 40% of schools stay open."

Newfoundland and Labrador: Policy in the face of declining enrolment

The provincial education system in Newfoundland and Labrador faces two problems: many small schools in remote communities, and a significantly declining population. The median school size is 228 students.

The province recognises that when a school in a small outport is closed, the hub of the community is taken out, and its continued existence is endangered. People with children will not move to a small community without a school, knowing their children will spend many hours a week on buses. Consequently, there is a designation for "small but necessary" schools, which are allocated more staff than would be generated by the student numbers. All schools in the province, no matter how small, have a principal.

Distance learning is a successful stategy in dealing with small and remote schools in Newfoundland and Labrador. Every school in the province has Internet access, and courses are available that would be difficult to provide in a real classroom, particularly in small secondary schools. The same strategy works well for professional development for teachers in remote areas.

The process for closing a school is a provincially regulated one ("Legislated not to be a dreadful process," said Assistant Deputy Minister Eric Burry). It takes place over a two-year schedule, with board officials consulting with the community and school council, and soliciting input on how best to manage the procedure.

Dr. Rozanski's Recommendations

In May 2002, the government appointed Dr. Mordechai Rozanski to head a Task Force to review the provincial education funding formula. The Education Equality Task Force Report made very specific recommendations concerning small schools and funding for single-school communities, including:

- "...to keep open a small school in a single-school commuity... core-support funding [to] cover the following:
  - a full-time principal and secretary for each elementary and secondary school
  - a full-time support staff person for each elementary and secondary school to ensure a safe, clean and well-maintained school, and
  - a full-time individual in a secondary school to provide advice on careers and postsecondary education
- "The updating of benchmark costs...will provide many boards with additional funding to sustain those small schools that they decide to keep open."
- "Updating the School Operations Allocation...will provide boards with funds to ensure that their small schools are safe, clean and well-maintained."
- "...additional funding...to enable [boards] to achieve core-support staffing that will make their small schools viable enough to provide a high quality and safe environment."
- "...review the benchmark factors and capacity criteria to ensure that boards that have small schools in single-school communities are not penalized for keeping those small schools open."

People for Education's Recommendations

People for Education recommends that the provincial government implement strategy and policy to meet the unique needs of Ontario's small schools. The government should:

- Base the funding for new pupil places on research on optimum school size.
- Change the per pupil benchmarks in the funding formula to ensure:
  - every school has a full-time **principal**,
  - one full-time **secretary** for every 272 students in elementary schools,
  - one full-time **teacher-librarians** for every 500 elementary and every 750 secondary students,
  - every student has access to a **physical education and a music teacher**,
  - every secondary school has **sufficient courses** to allow students to graduate without leaving their communities,
  - no student spends more than 1½ hours per day on the **school bus**,
  - students in schools from grades 7 to 12 have access to a **guidance counsellor**, and
  - boards with small populations have access to **psychologists and social workers**.
- Enact a standardized review process for the **construction and closing** of schools to include:
  - mandatory involvement of municipal governments in decision-making,
  - mandatory consultation periods of no shorter than six months, and
  - mandatory reports on the economic and social impact on the affected community.
- Adjust the **Small Schools criteria** to allow elementary schools with up to 200 students to qualify.
- Increase the **Small Schools Grant** to include funding for one extra full-time teacher per school.
- Create a designation for **small schools in single school communities** that cannot be closed.
- Expand and develop a provincial **distance learning** program which will enhance academic opportunities for students in small schools and professional development for teachers in remote areas; provide funding for wiring all provincial schools, ongoing internet access costs, and IT maintenance and updating.

Websites

Resource Materials

Saskatchewan: Small Schools Network, www.ssta.sk.ca/research/small_schools/95-09.htm

Strengthening Strategies for Small Schools, www.ssta.sk.ca/research/small_schools/97-01.htm

England: National Association for Small Schools, www.smallschools.org.uk/page2.htm

Chicago: Small Schools Workshop, www.smallschoolsworkshop.org/info3.html

Montana: The Montana Small Schools Alliance, www.ael.org/eric/

Washington State: The Small Schools Project, www.smallschoolsproject.org/

Alabama: PACERS Small School Cooperative, www.pacers.org/

Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania Association of Rural and Small Schools, www.parss.org/

Papers

KnowledgeWorks Foundation, and The Rural School and Community Trust, *Dollars and Sense: The Cost Effectiveness of Small Schools*. http://www.ruraledu.org/docs/dollars.pdf

Cotton, K. (1996). School size, school climate, and student performance. Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory. Retrieved April 23, 2003, from http://www.nwrel.org/scpd/sirs/10/c020.html.

Gregory, T. (2000). School reform and the no-man's-land of high school size. Indiana University. Retrieved April 23, 2003, from http://www.smallschoolsproject.org/articles/download/gregory.pdf.

Notes

[1] Chicago: Small Schools Workshop, www.smallschoolsworkshop.org/info3.html.

[2] http://www.smallschoolsworkshop.org/info1.html.

[3] KnowledgeWorks Foundation, and The Rural School and Community Trust, *Dollars and Sense: The Cost Effectiveness of Small Schools,* http://www.ruraledu.org/docs/dollars.pdf , p. 11.

[4] T. Gregory, *School Reform and the No-Man's-Land of School Size,* http://www.smallschoolsproject.org/articles/download/gregory.pdf, p. 6.

[5] KnowledgeWorks Foundation, and The Rural School and Community Trust, *Dollars and Sense: The Cost Effectiveness of Small Schools,* http://www.ruraledu.org/docs/dollars.pdf , p. 11.

[6] *Center for Rural Affairs Newsletter*, May 1999, http://www.cfra.org/resources/Publications/caseforsmallschools.htm , p. 3.

[7] Ontario Regulation 444/98, under the Education Act.

[8] Ministry of Education, May 2003.

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